

Episode Two: That's When the Remorse Set In

It's 8 o'clock on a Tuesday morning. I'm in a library at the Oregon State Penitentiary. This library is in a section of the prison that is run by the chaplains. It is a non-descript space – slightly worn carpet, fluorescent lights, an old piano off in a corner. There are book shelves on all of the walls. Because the penitentiary houses 2,000 people, the books cover many different faith traditions.

It's time for class to start. The men set up a circle of chairs, and slowly begin to gather. Some of them run down the hallway to score a cup of coffee from the chaplain's office, but eventually we're all together.

Herbert: Ok, well hopefully you all enjoyed the reading or found it instructive. So I think it would be fun to, kind of, try to see what kind of lessons we can draw from it.

The course I am teaching is focused on atonement, on how we can repair the damage we cause when we create harm. On this day, we are exploring the common emotions that arise when other people hurt us, on what it feels like to be a victim of someone else's behavior.

Herbert: And again, since we've all been on the receiving side of a wrong, we also know what it's like to feel like a person who's had a wrong committed against us. So why don't we start there?

As the conversation develops, several class members describe what it meant for them to fully consider how their victims might feel. Terrence was one of the guys who spoke up:

Terrence: I had a situation that made me really open up and understand about the harm and everything else that I committed. My victim's dad had wrote a letter to the judge, explaining why I should receive the death penalty. And at the end of his letter, he said, "Judge, I will never be able to hear my son say, "Dad, I love you," right. And when I read that, it stuck with me, because it made me think about my dad. And I would never want him to have to go through life without him hearing me say, "Dad, I love you." I mean, so when I read that, I thought about it, and it hit me. I was like, "Damn, that's fucked up." I did that, like I had no right to do that. Like, how do you come back from that?

Herbert: So it sounds like in hearing your victim's father talk about his emotional reaction, you were able to empathize with him and that seems to change how you thought about or felt about things.

Terrence: It changed a lot, yeah. Because before, I was just really getting into the emotional aspect of it, as far as what I'd done or what not. But after I read that, it was just, "Damn, I get it."

In our last episode, we explored how prisoners can begin to try to make amends. We saw how change can come about when prisoners see a need for a new lifestyle, when they look for new values to live by. But there is often another important motivation for prisoners to work to atone. It can come from always reminding themselves of their victims, and from taking a direct and honest look at the harms that they caused.

MAKING AMENDS

This is "Making Amends." I'm Steve Herbert. I used a rare degree of access to the Oregon State Penitentiary to explore how many prisoners deal with the past and how they search for a way to atone.

In this episode, we'll hear from prisoners who are continually trying to respond to the suffering caused by their crimes. For them, making amends is about how they seek to take responsibility for their actions, how they try to recognize the pain they've caused, and how they try to become better people in response.

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Terrence: I had a good childhood. There wasn't no violence in the home, or drugs, you know what I mean. Yeah, there was no reason, no reason for me to do what I did to end up in here.

So, Terrence has few regrets about his home life. His explanation for the murder that led him to prison lies elsewhere. He mentions two things. One is the fact that he was perhaps more aggressive than others his age, and the other was his love of money. His aggression was nurtured by high school football.

Terrence: All my violence came from that. So, the harder I hit, the more praise I got. And when I was going through whatever little emotion stuff I might've been going through, trying to find myself in high school, I had a source to release that. But after I graduated, those same emotions are still there, but there's no outlet.

One of the main outlets for Terrence's energy after he left high school was work. He took on a number of different jobs – sometimes many at once -- so that he could earn as much cash as possible. But as young as he was, he didn't always handle his money responsibly.

Terrence: And I also remember when I got paid, I think I must've got a check for around fifteen, sixteen hundred. And I had a banking account at Wells Fargo. I went there, and she says, "How do you want this? You want this in fifties or hundreds?" "Give it to me in fifties." And it felt good to have that money in my pocket. I should've put some up for rent. I should've been responsible for it. I bought some new rims for my car. I bought a new carburetor for my car. I bought some weed. I bought some clothes and just blowing the rest of it on dumb stuff.

Herbert: Eighteen-year-old stuff.

Terrence: Eighteen-year-old stuff, yeah. And my dad's like, "You spent money on your car?" I'm like, "Yeah." "You didn't put in no money for your rent?" I'm like, "No". He's like, "You want to go live in your car?" I'm like, "I don't want to go live in my car."

Like a lot of 18-year olds, Terrence's desire for money was much greater than his ability to earn it. That made it easy for him to be recruited by an acquaintance who wanted help selling marijuana.

MAKING AMENDS

Terrence: So, I end up meeting this guy, I ended up going to high school with this dude, but I didn't remember going to high school with him. So, we're kind of sitting down in his apartment one day, and he was like, "Well, this is what I'm doing. You might as well come and work for me". I'm like, "Alright." So I end up working for him and what not. That's pretty much how I got involved.

It proved to be good money.

Terrence: I'm feeling good. I'm keeping some money in my pocket, some new shoes on my feet, I'm dressing nice. I'm feeling pretty good. So, it was working out well. No one was getting hurt. I'm making money. So, it was, just, it was working out fine for me.

Even though Terrence was making good money, there came a day when he realized he could potentially earn much, much more.

Terrence: I drove up with him to Seattle to meet the guy who he bought from. And I remember we had maybe about thirty pounds of weed in my trunk driving back home, and that was more than I'd ever seen and what not. And then I remember there was a time where he had eighty thousand dollars on the coffee table when I came over. And that, I think, that was what really made me think, like, huh. I was kind of shown that you can have this, you can be in this position, you can be the man, right? And with me not thinking of the consequences -- my intention wasn't to kill him. That wasn't my intention at all. It was just, I don't know: that greed, that greed, led me down a bad path.

Herbert: So, when you went to his house, you just wanted to get that eighty thousand dollars.

Terrence: Yeah, I mean, I didn't really have no plan put together. I didn't show up with any type of weapon or anything like that. It was just some impulsive. . .I thought about it, but it was like this impulsive act or what not.

Terrence's robbery attempt did not go well. His target resisted with his own knife. Terrence got control of the knife, and used it to commit murder.

Terrence: In the beginning of me doing my time, I thought my sentence was excessive. Because in my mind I was still holding on to the fact that, if you're in that lifestyle, selling drugs, you either go to prison or you go to the grave. And I couldn't comprehend why society didn't understand that.

This way of thinking allowed Terrence to rationalize his crime. By this logic, Terrence's victim probably should have understood that death was a potential risk of dealing drugs. Because he thought he got too much prison time, Terrence tried to find a legal way to get his sentence reduced. When he reviewed some materials from his case, he ran across some pictures of his victim.

Terrence: One where he was on a horse when he was younger, and one when he was in some forest with his sister or whatever. And I remember just kind of looking at it. And

then I had pictures of how they found him. And kind of looking at that, it's kinda like, "You did this. You caused all this." And I remember sitting there and it was like, looking at those two pictures, everything was pretty much like broken.

That was also about the time that Terrence discovered the note from his victim's father, expressing his grief that he would never again hear words of love from his son.

Terrence: And I sat there, and I thought about it and I was like, damn, I'm real close to my dad. I would not want my dad to have to go through that at all. And that changed everything for me. That's when the remorse set in, the empathy came in, and it was just like, damn, you took his son away. You don't want no one to come and take you away from your dad, you know what I mean, and everything he would have to go through. But that was a good point in my life for me, because it gave me the chance to start feeling the emotions and everything else.

As Terrence struggled with those emotions, he began to feel an obligation to his victim's memory.

Terrence: I mean, I don't think it's going to be anything that I'm ever going to be able to completely get over, because I feel that, I took, I really took his life for no reason. I don't want his death to be in vain. So, it's kinda like, everything I do, I have to, it might sound weird, but I feel like he's like there with me, like he's here with me. Like, not necessarily pushing me and what not but, I don't know, I feel this obligation to make sure that I do all that I can to make sure that his life wasn't in vain.

Herbert: And what more specifically does that motivate you to do?

Terrence: It motivates me not to get in little, dumb, petty trouble and stuff around here and to build myself into the best man that I can. He doesn't have that opportunity any more. All the things that he doesn't have the opportunity to do because of me, it's like I feel I have to take advantage of the opportunity for me and him, because I took that away from him.

Herbert: So, do you experience that, like, as a debt that you owe? Or it sounds like you think of it more as an obligation that you have to fulfill.

Terrence: I think it's more of like an obligation. I don't think that it's everything. I can never repay it. You know what I mean? But, in my mind it's kind of like, I can see him kind of looking down and being like ok well, say I was a bum and I'm addicted to drugs and I'm just living in the streets and I'm laying in the gutter and he's like, "You took my life, for this?" You know what I mean? Well, what the hell.

Herbert: You're wasting two people's lives

Terrence: Yeah, exactly. You took my future and you ruined yours. And this is the outcome? You know what I mean? So, that plays in my mind a lot.

Herbert: And it motivates you. . .

Terrence: It just motivates me to push myself more, to do my best to live the best life that I can live, and to try to actually be there for my family and for myself the best I can. I have a lot of, I feel I have a lot of responsibilities to my family and him and myself.

One of Terrence's classmates, Moustafa, also says he feels inspired to do his best because of his victim. And, like Terrence, Moustafa's upbringing would never have predicted that he would come to be serving a 14-year sentence for his role in a robbery that ended in murder.

Moustafa: At a very early age, I thought, okay, when I finish my high school, I want to travel overseas and get my college degree. And by overseas, I meant the West, because we had this idea that it was continuously being fed to us from an early age, that everything Western, or American, represents status, and that's what was sought after. And I wanted that, so—like, part of me being ambitious and part of me wanting and desiring the best, that's what I looked after.

Moustafa is originally from Egypt, but moved to Saudi Arabia at an early age. His father was a successful entrepreneur, and Moustafa wanted badly to follow in those footsteps. Although he had long planned to earn a business degree in the United States, his decision to move to Portland was completely spontaneous.

Moustafa: The desire to travel was always there, but the actual planning and the execution just happened in literally the span of a week. A friend of mine was like, "Okay, I'm traveling to Oregon, USA to go to Portland Community College." And at that moment, I didn't know what a community college is, and I didn't even know what Oregon is, like I didn't have that concept of the States being divided into 50, and all—how vast the nation is. And I was like, "Let's go!" You know, just like that, "Let's go!" So, I was able to apply, and get my paperwork done in like a matter of a week, 10 days, and next thing you know, I'm on an airplane. I arrived in Portland on Thanksgiving of 2011, as a matter of fact. I had no idea what Thanksgiving is, so coming out of the airplane, they were like, "Happy Thanksgiving." And I was like, "Huh, okay? You're welcome, thank you."

Because he didn't know Portland, much less anyone who lived there, Moustafa gravitated toward people who spoke his mother tongue, Arabic.

Moustafa: The company of people that I landed among were not the most supportive and not the most positive group of young men. But what we had in common was the language and that's about it. I would have never been around them or hanged around them back home, but I was sort of limited in my options. And in my situation, that backfired in a great way.

Moustafa was a serious student, and was soon earning good grades. And he was working a steady job on campus. So, he was staying on the path of success that he had long planned for himself. Unfortunately, his social scene was leading him in a different direction.

Moustafa: Slowly but surely, I was losing my moral sense of what's wrong and right. You know, and I—at the beginning, I view it and saw it as, there's nothing wrong with having weed around. And then, oh, there's nothing wrong of driving to pick it up and give it to a guy. Oh, there's nothing wrong with selling it and making an easy 50 bucks on the side, even though I didn't need the money, you know. But it was just like, that sense of adventure, that sense of excitement, that sense of, "What, are you going to chicken out now and just be all scared?", you know, so. I stayed focused, I went to school, I took my classes, I maintained my full-time student status. So it wasn't like, I dived head first into a whole different life and just forgot about the main reason that brought me here.

Sadly, Moustafa misgauged his ability to assess the harm toward which he was headed.

Moustafa: Things were happening around me that I just said, "Okay, it's taking place, I'm not part of it, so, no harm, no foul." And it got the point until when one day, I'm sitting at a friend's house, and then a mutual friend says, "I'm going to rob this guy and take his weed and money. Could you give me a ride there?" And for some reason, I saw nothing wrong with that, you know? And I'm highly, I mean speaking about it right now, I'm highly perplexed and confused by my decision making, and by my inability to see the apparent wrong in that. And I didn't think that any major harm would result from going on that journey.

But major harm did occur. The target of the robbery was murdered by a member of Moustafa's group.

After his arrest, Moustafa spent nearly four years facing a charge of aggravated murder. He eventually accepted a plea agreement for lesser crimes, and found his way to court to finalize his sentence. What might have been a routine court appearance turned out to be anything but.

Moustafa: So, at sentencing I was given the opportunity to speak to them and I decided to take that chance. I wrote down five, six sentences and I said, "Okay, I can do this. I can go in there, stand up, read out of that piece of paper, express how sorry I am." Telling the mom, that I do not dare to think, or to know the extent of the pain that you might be going through, you know? And I tried, but I couldn't really articulate myself because I broke down, I was emotional. Few sentences came out but I think they got the message. And then it came their chance to speak, and the mother read out of a statement that she had prepared and uh, there I am sitting expecting to be told what of a monster I am, and how much hurt I have caused to that family. But what happened was something that I would never have imagined or wished for, like, that would have just been asking too much. Because she paid her son his due respect and spoke of what he-- of who he is and what he did and how he loved people and was a caring person. And then she addressed me, saying that I had been given another chance, and the best way to go about it was to utilize that chance and try to make something positive.

Those words from his victim's mother resonate with Moustafa to this day. They provide him with a reminder of the harms he caused, and a motivation to try to make right. He discussed this in class one morning.

Moustafa: I hold a certain level of resentment to my younger self. And I find it hard to forgive myself. But I find that positive, in the aspect that I'm channeling that frustration and anger at my younger self to doing something positive right now. So I see forgiving myself as the end of a marathon and I'm running a marathon right now and at every step is doing something good, doing something good, doing something good to improve my life, the life of those around me, and put something positive out there. I messed up so bad that it's hard to forgive myself. Like I had no business doing what I was doing and I had no right to hurt the people that got hurt the way they did and hurting my family. And I don't think I'm going to get to a point and say, you know, what it was alright, it was okay. It was alright.

Herbert: But if I also hear you correctly, and maybe Terrence this resonates with you, to the extent that you're mad at yourself still, that's part of your fuel.

Mustafa: Definitely. It's a main part of my fuel. It's what's making me get up and try to do right, you know. So continuously working on doing right and making amends and correcting my wrongs comes as part of being mad at myself.

So, both Terrence and Moustafa center the experience of their victim's families as their main inspiration for trying to make amends. But they also both recognize that their own families suffer because of their crimes. That suffering provides additional motivation. Terrence is especially concerned about his father.

Terrence: He always told me I was his retirement plan. I didn't understand what he was saying. I was too young. But as I got older, once I got in here and I'm reflecting about my life and some of the things I've learned and everything else, I understood that he's relying on me, he was relying on me to make sure I have my stuff together. So when he gets older and goes to the doctor, and the doctor's like, "Listen, you can no longer live by yourself. Do you have someone you can live with?" He needs to be able to say, "Yeah, I can go live with my son." That's what I comprehend when he's saying that I'm his retirement plan. With that in mind, I have to do everything I can to get myself out of this situation and into a stable situation, so I can still take care of him when need be.

Moustafa has similar feelings about his family.

Moustafa: I'm dealing with the fact that I am thousands and thousands of miles away from family and friends, and I have no sense of control over how things are going over there, so, I'm like—and again, I keep thinking that I'm supposed to be back home right now, taking care of my family and being there for my mom and being there for my dad, you know. So, it adds an extra burden over my shoulders, you know. So if I give up, what else is left? You know, I mean, you give up on yourself, you give up on life, you know. So, and again, this place and this environment would make you think of such things, but you come quickly to the realization that that's not an option. You can't give up. How else you going to make it?

For both Terrence and Moustafa, and undoubtedly many, many others who are incarcerated, to make it means to be perpetually focused on their victims. Both of them feel that they must live a good life or else they dishonor their victims' memories. For them, the journey toward making amends is about addressing the sense of obligation they feel to both the families of their victims, and to their own families.

But no matter how motivated a prisoner might be to atone, they must travel on this journey in a place where personal change is not that easy.

Cameron: This is literally a common quote that people give as advice to kids coming into prison: When in doubt, just fight.

Steve: So, I'm trying to say, look man, you could either go this way and here's the six things are going to happen, that I know for a fact. Or it can go this way. You know, I've seen it all, I can tell you all, and there's a better way to do it.

How to navigate prison culture on the path to atonement – that's next time on Making Amends